

The Unbound Word

(What prison could not stop.)

2 Timothy 2:8-13

Last words can sometimes tell you what a person is living for.

Before his execution in 2001, Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, left one statement: a handwritten copy of William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus*. It ends with the declaration, "I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul."

That is how many people define freedom today, namely being in charge of yourself. But that is not freedom. That is defiance. And how many of you know, defiance is just another kind of chain dressed as freedom.

The apostle Paul is also writing his last words. Second Timothy is his final letter, written to a next-generation leader while the time of his departure was at hand. He is in chains. But he does not say, "Timothy, be the captain of your soul." He says, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel."

McVeigh's last words point inward. Paul's last words point to Christ.

Dorothea Day wrote a Christian answer to *Invictus* called *Conquered*. She did not thank "whatever gods may be" for an unconquerable soul. She thanked the God she knew "for Christ—the Conqueror of my soul." She ended where Paul begins: "Christ is the Master of my fate. Christ is the Captain of my soul."

That is the freedom the unbound word gives. Not the right to rule yourself, but the grace to follow the risen Son of David.

Last year, God literally opened prison doors for me to preach from this same text in Illinois prisons. Paul's reference to the unbound word is not a figure of speech.

After a terminal cancer diagnosis, and a long season of wondering what God was doing in the waiting, I wrote *Collateral Blessings*. It is a record of how God works in uncertain times to bring unexpected good—through illness, through incarceration, and through doors only God could open. Neither prison cells nor cancer cells could cancel God's purposes. The word of God is not bound.

In the book, I tell how the Lord connected me to our brother Bert Berrios when he was behind bars. The word of God set him free in Christ while he still had years left to serve.

Although he is a free man living a productive life, he has told me that the most formative days of his life were those years in prison with an open Bible.

Because of Bert's conversion story, Manny Mill at Koinonia House, chaplains, and others believed the book needed to be in the hands of the incarcerated. The Lord opened the door, and Bert and I went on tour through Illinois prisons. We handed out free copies and preached from this same text: "But the word of God is not bound."

Robert Gross was in one of those prisons. He heard our testimonies and this passage. After serving a ten-year sentence, he contacted me. He has been attending Midwest Bible Church for a few months now, and he is here this morning.

Then in December 2025, Koinonia House put together care packages for inmates at Cook County Jail. They wanted *Collateral Blessings* in every package. Five thousand care packages went out, along with five thousand copies of the book. Since then I have received letters from prisoners and from family members.

The redeeming hope of Christ in those pages has renewed faith and set people free while they are still behind bars.

Paul knew that same paradox. He is chained. The word is not. And because the word is not bound, he endured, he prayed for open doors for the gospel, and he seized them. We must do the same.

Main Idea: We swim against the currents of this life and become messengers of God's unbound word by remembering Jesus our risen King, trusting the power of His word, and letting that word work in us and through us.

As we unfold the text this morning, we will consider three truths that enable us to swim against the current and become messengers of God's unbound word.

1. Remember Jesus our risen King.

The first truth Paul gives Timothy is this: Remember Jesus our risen King. He writes:

“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel.” (2 Timothy 2:8)

Kent Hughes notes that Paul is calling Timothy to a godly memory. This is the first and foremost memory essential for standing firm for Christ, especially when times are tough. We must remember the gospel—not as a slogan, but as a Person.

Paul does not say, “Remember your calling.” He does not say, “Remember how hard it is.” He says, “Remember Jesus Christ.” Then he names two things about Him that Timothy must not lose sight of, two truths in which he must anchor his soul.

First, He is risen from the dead. The grave is empty! The worst thing that can happen to a servant of Christ has already been defeated. Resurrection is not a metaphor for bouncing back. It is an event in history. Jesus lives.

Second, He is the offspring of David, the promised King. God kept His word. The One we follow is not a life coach with a cross necklace. He is the rightful King who rules with justice and mercy.

That is how you swim against the current. The current says, “Be the captain of your soul.” The gospel says, “Christ is the Captain of your soul.” The current says, “Make your life work.” The gospel says, “Remember Jesus.”

I have looked men in the eye in a prison chapel and said: In prison, it is easy to feel forgotten. But Jesus has not forgotten you. He descended from David, fulfilling God’s promise to send a King who rules with justice and mercy.

That King sees you. He knows your struggles, your regrets, and your fears. And He is offering you a fresh start through His resurrection power. Have you grabbed hold of that hope? Remember Jesus Christ. He is the key to freedom that no lock can stop.

I shared that with the prisoners and it applies to us.

Some of us may not feel forgotten. We feel busy, competent, and in control. That too can be a dangerous prison. We remember our schedule, our preferences, even our ministry—and forget Jesus.

Others of us feel trapped. It may be a hard job that will not let up, or an illness that will not leave, or a circumstance we did not choose and cannot fix. We may not be behind bars, but we know what it is to feel locked in.

Paul’s exhortation is for us too.

The risen Son of David has not forgotten you. No grave could hold Him, and your situation is not stronger than His life. He can bring life where you see only delay. He can turn what feels like tragedy into a place where His triumph is seen.

That does not mean every hard thing disappears this week. It means Jesus is alive, and He is still able to give a fresh start in the very place that feels like the end.

But remembering Jesus is not automatic. Our tendency is to forget what we should remember and remember what we ought to forget. That is why God gives us means.

How do we remember Him when the currents of the world are against us?

We remember Him by immersing ourselves in the Word. Let Scripture put His name back in your mouth when your feelings are getting the best of you

We remember Him in prayer—prayer that seeks His face not just His hand. We pray: “Jesus, You are risen. You are my King.”

We remember Him at the Lord’s Table. He said, “Do this in remembrance of Me.”

We remember Him in Christ centered community. Isolation helps us forget. Faithful relationships help us remember.

We remember Him through a mentor who reminds us and keeps pointing us back to Jesus.

The next generation will not inherit a living faith from activity without Christ, or from despair that has forgotten He is risen.

The question in a prison and in a free city is the same: Have you taken hold of that hope? Remember Jesus Christ. He is the key to a freedom no bars can stop—and no amount of outward freedom can replace.

2. Trust the power of God’s word.

Secondly, to stand for Christ against the current, we must trust the power of God’s word.

“For which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake

of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” (2 Timothy 2:9–10)

Paul wrote these words when he was locked up for preaching the gospel. He knew what it was to lose freedom and be treated unjustly or like a nobody. Maybe you feel like your past has chained you, or a hard place has cut you off from God’s plan.

Paul is not complaining. He is pointing to a truth: the prison could lock his body, but it could not lock the message of Jesus. That message kept spreading—through letters, through word of mouth, through lives changed by the gospel.

Two thousand years later, that same unbound word has not stayed bound in Rome. It has crossed continents, cultures, and classes. It has been preached in palaces and in prison yards, copied by hand, smuggled across borders, whispered in hiding, and read aloud in churches like this one. Empires have tried to silence it. Fashion has tried to outgrow it. Suffering has tried to drown it. Still it speaks. It is breaking through prison walls and going out from churches across the city for the same reason it has reached the ends of the earth: the word of God is not bound.

Your circumstances do not have the final say. God’s purpose is bigger than the walls in front of you.

I shared this with the prisoners, and I do not shame their first plea to the Lord. Many of them pray first for release. That is understandable. God is merciful. He is able to deliver us from prison, from illness, from a crushing job, from a situation that looks impossible. He can make a way where there seems to be no way. Pray that. Ask Him. He is able.

But God’s message and purposes are bigger than prison walls. And they are bigger than physical freedom. Through His word He wants to do more than change our circumstances. He wants to change us through them.

Louie Giglio put it this way: “God uses our circumstances to make us more useful for later roles in His unfolding story. It is not always about the answer to the prayer. It is also about what He is forming while you wait. God is still writing the story. Quit trying to steal the pen. Trust the Author.

Paul’s chains were not the end of the story. They became a means by which others would hear the unbound word.

So, the prayer has to go deeper. Not only, “Lord, get me out,” but, “Lord, grow me through. Change me. Refine me. Use this fire to make me more like Jesus.” That is not a smaller prayer. It is a larger one. It asks for more than a change of address. It asks for a change of heart.

Because of that unbound word I have letters on my desk from men who are still locked up yet free in Christ and newly alive. God’s purpose was never only a new address. It was a new man—and a gospel that keeps traveling.

If I could preach that to men who cannot leave, I must preach it to us who can leave and still waste our freedom.

Paul prayed for open doors and walked through them while still bound. God opened prison doors for a book, a gospel tour, five thousand care packages, and a man sitting among us who once heard this text behind bars. The word was not bound then. It is not bound now. The question is whether we will trust its power more than we trust a change in our circumstances.

3. Let the word of God work in you and through you.

Finally, that unbound word is meant to work in you and through you.

“The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” (2 Timothy 2:11–13)

When Paul says the saying is trustworthy, he is not handing Timothy a slogan for the wall. He is handing him a word that can bear the weight of a life.

Many scholars believe these lines were already known in the churches. Some suggest it was a short confession, perhaps even sung, a kind of early catechism the saints could remember when the current was strong. Paul does not invent new motivation here. He puts in Timothy's mouth the truths already burning in the church: truths about God and the gospel that keep us moving forward for our sake and for the sake of others.

Listen to what this word does in us.

If we have died with Him, we will also live with Him. The Christian life begins with union, not self-improvement. We belong to Christ by grace before we ever follow Him in costly ways.

If we endure, we will also reign with Him. Endurance is not grim willpower, nor is it a ladder we climb to earn heaven. We already belong to Christ by grace. It is clinging to the risen King when the current pulls the other way—because suffering is not the last word. Those who endure with Christ will reign with Christ.

If we deny Him, He also will deny us. That is a sober word. A consumer faith that uses Jesus for comfort but will not confess Him or live for Him under pressure is not the faith of this letter.

If we are faithless, He remains faithful—for He cannot deny Himself. This is not permission to drift. It is the gospel underneath our frailty. Our hope is not that we never waver. Our hope is that Christ cannot stop being who He is.

That is how the word works in you. It kills self-rule, raises us to new life, enables endurance, warns against denial, and anchors us in His faithfulness.

Furthermore, a word that works in you will not stay in you. Paul has already told us why he endures: *“for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.”* You cannot keep a living word as a private reservoir. It wants a channel.

The prophet Jeremiah felt that. Under the pressure of speaking for God when people wanted to silence the messenger, he said,

“If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” Jeremiah 20:9

The word that works in you will not stay in you. Silence becomes exhaustion. But witness becomes relief.

This is how the word works through you. What God plants in the heart is meant to travel—to the next person, the next generation, the next hard place where someone needs to hear that Jesus is risen and His word is not bound.

Conclusion

Paul does not leave Timothy with a technique. He leaves him with a Person, a power, and a fruit—so he can swim against the current.

The Person: Remember Jesus our risen King—when the current says, “Captain your own soul.”

The power: Trust the word of God—when the current says, “Your chains have the last word.”

The fruit: Let that word work in you and through you—when the current says, “Keep your faith private and comfortable.”

That is how we become the people God wants us to be. Not consumers of religion. But messengers of God’s unbound word.

Remember Jesus our risen King.

Trust the power of God's word.

Let that word work in you and through you—for your sake, for the sake of the next generation, and for the greater fame of Jesus.